Tertiary Teachers’ Perspectives on Emotion Regulation

Veronica O’Toole

Abstract

This research is one component of a multi-componential exploratory investigation of emotions in tertiary teaching. A pilot group of 14 tertiary teachers from different tertiary contexts (one university, one polytechnic, and two private training providers) discussed their emotion regulation goals and strategies within a semi-structured interview format. The interview results showed that all the tertiary teachers in this small sample used strategies to regulate their emotions, both consciously and unconsciously. The tertiary teachers reported high rates of cognitive and behavioural emotion regulation methods, the latter being more prevalent during and after the emotion eliciting event. Future research is needed into how tertiary teachers might improve their emotion regulation skills using cognitive methods which are less costly to health and wellbeing.

Key words: Emotion regulation, tertiary teaching, role of emotions in teaching

Introduction

Research into emotions in tertiary teaching contexts is expanding, yet it remains under-researched (Hasting, 2008). Dirks (2008) states that ‘emotional issues never seem very far from the surface in adult learning contexts’ (p. 9). Meyer and Turner (2007) argue the need to continue to develop theoretical understandings of emotion in teaching and learning because of the ‘increasingly difficult and complex demands placed on teachers and students in our rapidly changing societies’ (p. 244). Responding to complex demands is likely to be a complex process for each individual teacher, particularly when it comes to managing their emotions. For example, drawing on emotion regulation research (e.g. Gross, 1998), Sutton (2004) found that, similarly to previous psychological research with adults in general, middle school teachers used a variety of methods or ‘strategies’ (p. 379) to manage their emotions in the classroom. A further finding - unique to the teachers in her study - was that ‘emotion regulation is an important daily teaching goal’ (Sutton, 2004, p. 394). The purpose of this paper is to report emerging themes on the emotion regulation goals and strategies of a small sample of tertiary teachers from Aotearoa New Zealand.

Hastings (2008) asserts that while university based educators may be aware of the importance of emotions, few understand the process by which ‘emotion rules are produced to constitute teachers’ emotions and subjectivity’ (p. 511).
Hastings (2008) reported 'feelings of anger, shame, hurt, fear, frustration, anxiety and abandonment' (p. 504) from school-based teacher educators in an Australian university pre-service teacher training programme. Educator guilt has also been noted to occur when student teachers failed their practicum assessments, or when students failed to learn due to 'poor' (p. 502) pedagogy. Hastings has identified the need to assist university teachers to 'cope' (p. 511) with negative events.

Two New Zealand tertiary educators (Kirkpatrick and Spiller, 2009) were prompted to study the emotions of their university based tertiary teaching students participating in a graduate programme in adult teaching, based on these students' experiences of negative emotions related to their portfolio assessments. They found both negative and positive emotions were reported, the latter being more likely at the end of the assessment task. Kirkpatrick and Spiller's findings included a recommendation to be aware of the emotions that tertiary teaching students are likely to experience in their journey to becoming tertiary teachers and to 'provide space' for this to happen safely. Both Hastings (2007) and Kirkpatrick and Spiller (2010) demonstrate the presence of strong emotions associated with creating one's identity as a tertiary teacher. They also demonstrate the role of emotion as a 'critical dimension of teaching' (p. 170).

Teaching is an 'emotional practice' (Hargreaves, 1998, p. 835) and like other 'caring professions' (p. 840) it requires not only emotional sensitivity but also 'active emotional labor' (Hochschild, 1983, in Hargreaves, 1998, p. 840). Clegg has found that 'significant' emotional labour is expended in tertiary contexts (2000, p. 460). Emotional labour is the ongoing self-regulation required by individuals to maintain, create, manage and display the appropriate emotions for any given interpersonal situation (Naring et al, 2006). Emotion regulation refers to 'the processes by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them and how they experience and express these emotions' (Gross, 1998, p. 275). Gross has traced the theoretical construct of emotion regulation back to Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) stress and coping theory. The 'coping process' refers to 'cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and internal demands (and conflicts between them) that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person' (Lazarus, 1991, p. 112). Coping may be problem-focused, by taking action to address the cause of the negative emotion such as modifying an assessment (e.g., Fitzpatrick & Spiller, 2010), or emotion-focused, also known as cognitive-coping through 'reappraisal' (Lazarus, 1991, p. 112). Reappraisal involves changing one's thoughts to change the emotion. For example, a teacher may try to reduce feelings of anger towards a student who has
not completed assigned work, by reminding herself that the student has had other problems to deal with.

Gross (2002) has provided evidence that cognitive reappraisal is better for the individual than suppressing emotions, on three fronts. First, medically, there is ample research evidence that the psychophysiological effect of suppression due to ‘increased sympathetic activation of the cardiovascular system’ (p. 287), is unhealthy overall and a ‘steep price’ (2002, p. 288) to pay for emotion regulation. In teaching, emotion suppression is associated with emotional exhaustion and burnout (Naring et al 2006). Second, the social effects of emotion suppression were found in experimental studies with dyads (Gross, 2002). The partners of people who deliberately suppressed their emotions showed greater increases in blood pressure than partners of those who did not. This is consistent with the notion of emotional intersubjectivity (Denzin, 1984), which is ‘an interactional appropriation of another’s emotionality such that one feels one’s way into the feelings and intentional feeling states of the other’ (p. 130). Third, cognitive effects or ‘cognitive costs’ (Richards and Gross, 2000 p. 410) of emotion suppression have been shown in the negative effect on memory tasks such as self-reported memory and an ‘objective memory test for their own emotional experiences’ (p.421). Given the likelihood that emotion regulation occurs in social interactions, misunderstandings and arguments may result from inaccurate memory effects of emotion suppression (Richards and Gross, 2000). These effects have implications for teachers, who often need to remember concepts when teaching. Furthermore, in situations where one student may be a frequent trigger for a teacher’s anger, which is regulated through suppression rather than reappraisal, the teacher’s memory about such a student may become inaccurate.

Campos et al (2004) believe that individual emotion regulation uses the same set of processes as emotion itself and that regulation may be ‘evident before an emotion is elicited’ (p. 380). This may be achieved through ‘cognitive pre-appraisal’ or ‘short-circuiting of appraisals’ (Campos et al., 2004, p.381), through which an anticipated emotion experience may be manipulated through changing thoughts prior to the emotion-eliciting event. Sutton Mudrey-Camino and Knight (2009) found that middle school teachers’ emotion regulation could be achieved through modifying cognitive processes and/or behavioural responses. Behavioural regulation may be further categorized as either ‘up-regulating’ or ‘down-regulating’ (p. 132). Up-regulating refers to a person’s attempts to increase the intensity or duration of an emotion, as one of the diary notes from a tertiary teacher in our study revealed when she reported that she was ‘forcing enthusiasm’
Down-regulating refers to a person’s attempt to reduce an emotion experience. For example, teachers frequently report their need to control their anger responses in school contexts (Sutton, 2004). Finally, teachers’ emotion regulation strategies may be linked to their motivation for using specific teaching strategies or even their motivation for teaching as a profession (Hargreaves, 1998; Sutton and Wheatley, 2003). Brackett et al (2008) report that ‘teachers who are more skilled at regulating their emotions tend to report less burnout and greater job satisfaction’ (p. 336). Feldman Barrett et al (2001) showed that people who can differentiate between negative emotions and label them are more able to regulate these negative emotions ‘especially those individuals who experience their emotion at greater intensity’ (p. 720). The difference was less pronounced, however, for positive emotions.

Given the limited recent research in the literature about emotion in tertiary teaching, sponsorship by Ako Aotearoa - a national New Zealand funding body dedicated to the pursuit of excellence in tertiary teaching through evidence-based research – was forthcoming for a preliminary pilot study. The aims of the project were to document and explore the following:

1. The range of emotions experienced by a group of tertiary teachers during teaching situations;
2. The emotion regulation goals and strategies of these tertiary teachers;
3. The self-reported subjective well-being and emotion regulation strategies of these tertiary teachers using existing psychometric measures;
4. Future directions for research into emotions in tertiary teaching in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The first aim was met through a diary study (O’Toole et al 2010b). The participants were also asked to complete, online, a set of psychometric tests focused on emotional wellbeing and satisfaction with life (to be reported in a further paper). This paper focuses on the findings from data collected through interviews.

The Pilot Study

Four tertiary institutions (one university, one polytechnic, and two private training providers) were approached through their management and informed consent was obtained for the principal researcher to attend their staff meetings and invite staff to participate in this study. Fifteen participants across the four tertiary institutions completed dairies. Fourteen agreed to be interviewed, and 12 completed the questionnaires. Six of the participants were female, ranging in age...
from 40 to 57 and had been teaching from between less than a year and 13 years. The nine males ranged in age from 40 to 66 and had been teaching from between one and 30 years. One male participant was not interviewed. This sample size is regarded as sufficient for in-depth qualitative study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The author conducted individual semi-structured interviews of approximately 45 minutes to investigate the teachers’ emotion regulation goals and strategies. The first four questions were designed to open up the dialogue and bring the participant into a conversation about emotion regulation. The remainder of the interview focused on examples from their experience, their perceptions and attributions about emotion regulation. A reflective listening approach (Gordon, 1979) was used, at times reiterating points for clarification as required (Hastings, 2008). The semi-structured interview, drawing on questions used by Sutton (2004) included both open and closed questions to identify themes and enable spontaneous elaboration.

A ‘simple qualitative iterative approach’ (Hastings, 2009, p. 501) was used, framing the questions as themes initially. Although not subjected to a specific model of discourse analysis, the interviews were conducted with the expectation that the participants would demonstrate some self-awareness of their emotions and their ways of managing or controlling their emotions. Discussing such abstract concepts relies on both interviewer and interviewee ‘sharing a complex symbolic representational system’ (Potter and Weatherall, 1987, p. 9). All data were coded for anonymity (e.g., TT1 for Tertiary Teacher 1, TT2 for Tertiary Teacher 2).

**Interview Results and Discussion**

This section reports, analyses and discusses the findings related specifically to emotion regulation. It is beyond the scope of this paper to report the full interview results, due to the extensive nature of the data. Alton-Lee (1984) acknowledges that ‘researcher assumptions, particularly those that influence the kinds of data selected, are hidden variables in most investigations’ (p. 69).

**Question 1: ‘When you think about emotions and classroom teaching, what comes to mind?’**

A number of personal theories were stated such as; ‘Emotions are temporary; they can’t really be controlled’ (TT 9), although later in the interview TT 9 did describe emotion regulation methods. TT 10 replied that the classroom elicits ‘a whole plethora of emotions actually! It’s never just reasonably straightforward.'
There are different emotions all the time. TT 3 immediately said 'stress'. TT 5 and TT 8 referred to the potential for teachers to 'project' their own emotions onto the students.

Six of the fourteen teachers spontaneously talked about emotion regulation. This was similar to Sutton’s (2004) ‘almost two thirds’ of middle school teachers who also did so in response to the same question. Pre-appraisal (Campos et al, 2008) statements included: ‘I just take it as it comes, I approach the classroom with no expected hiccups’ (TT 2); ‘So yeah, at times you’re not on edge, but you’re aware of the fact that you’re doing something fairly important (TT 16); ‘lack of emotions’ trying to keep your cool’ (TT 14). Behavioural down-regulating (Sutton, 2004) statements included: ‘the tension between the role of the professional and the person doing the job (for example when irritated) … the role that I play in the class requires that I stand back from that’ (TT 11). ‘Probably if it was a positive, I’d be more inclined to smile or show some outward sign. If it’s negative, over the years I’ve developed showing absolutely nothing’ (TT 12).

**Question 2: Could you look at this list (anger, fear, sadness, joy, disgust, surprise, love/affection) and tell me which one, two or three seem most relevant to you when teaching?**

Nine teachers identified anger as relevant in teaching, and six identified happiness/joy. Affection, sadness and surprise were relevant to four teachers. These frequencies were similar in ranking to those reported in their diaries (O’Toole et al., 2010). The salience of anger is consistent with teachers in middle school (e.g. Sutton, 2004) and tertiary institutions (Hasting, 2008; Kirkpatrick & Spiller, 2009). The following examples are illustrative of spontaneous explanations of anger;

But, like today, anger. You know, I had a field trip planned for tomorrow, thirty students and nineteen put their names down not wanting to go. That made me really cross, and the rest of my lesson dissolved at that point. And I went through the motions (TT 1).

I think we’re put, more recently, we’re really put in positions where it’s sort of, we’re being asked to really perform very well and we’re assessed on how well we perform, and that’s directly related to our ability to hold onto a job. And it’s sort of like an axe over your head. However, we’re put in positions where timetables and classes to changing next fall into a new semester, where class numbers are
excessive, where expectations are unrealistic.... I don't sort of have
emotional reactions particular to the classroom environment, it's
more of those surrounding factors. And it feels unreasonable (TT 3).

Anger. If I've been preparing them for Monday, Tuesday,
Wednesday, Thursday and I get to Friday and they haven't done it,
well then if I'm not careful I'll feel a bit angry at them. Sometimes I
feel affection towards them because I can see, often in this situation,
they are some mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, they are
far away from home - they are out of their culture. They are often
dealing with significant life issues and I feel for them, I think they've
worked hard (TT 11).

These selected responses resonate with the emotion regulation literature. For
example, teachers' emotions are mainly elicited by students (Sutton & Conway,
2000). TT 11 has described her cognitive reappraisal process, and her way of
being careful. TT 3's response demonstrates institutional effects.

**Question 3: 'Do you ever try to control, regulate or mask your emotional
experiences in the classroom?'**

Thirteen participants said 'yes'. Although one tertiary teacher said 'no', he later
explained that he does in fact regulate emotions. This may reflect the wording
of the question as 'try'. This tertiary teacher does not have to make a conscious
effort, yet does regulate his emotions.

**Question 4: 'Is there anything else you would like to say about emotions and
teaching?'**

Topics raised included emotion regulation, management and staff morale and
the impact of restructuring. Examples of such responses included the following:

So I was sort of thinking the other day, when I was going back
through some stuff here (in the emotion diary) that you know how
a doctor gets removed from the situation? Well I sort of felt in my
way that working with the class is a bit, that, detached. If you don't
get too emotional and too into it. You don't end up getting upset....
Someone was telling me that something like one in four people are
on some kind of medication these days. (TT 14).
Tertiary Teacher 14’s observation about emotion regulation is consistent with Gross’s (2001) response modulation. Tertiary Teachers 11 and 8 (below), identified the importance of emotional engagement, consistent with Hargreaves (1998). TT 11’s observation is also consistent with Denzin’s (1984) emotional intersubjectivity.

That a person who, a teacher who is able to process their emotions and recognise them, and work with them is possibly a more perceptive engager of the person that they are teaching (TT 11).

Yeah, well I think, that’s what keeps me in the job, I mean, I love the teaching, I really do. To me it’s a passion, it’s a calling. It’s taken me some years to realise that, you know, whereas, the fact that it’s just gone, it’s gone way beyond now just being a job. I can't imagine myself doing anything else now, apart from training or teaching. I just love it so much (TT 8).

Tertiary Teacher 12 describes an approach that epitomizes emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) and response modulation (Gross, 2001).

It would be reasonably important not to let the students see that they had actually triggered something with you. Particularly if it was a negative, because I believe others may see it and it becomes a manipulation tool. So I would work very hard at making sure that was never shown as a weakness. Not a weakness, but as a negative point that they could use. The happiness one, it doesn’t bother me because that’s something to be celebrated (TT 12).

Tertiary Teacher 1 reported negative emotions related to management and restructuring effects.

In tertiary, a lot of the emotion came from the management of us… because we had to restructure, and we took that into the classroom with us. Some of it was classroom-evoked (TT 1)
Emotion Regulation Questions

Please describe a scenario where you tried to control, mask or regulate your emotions.

All 14 participants provided an example of a scenario in which they had tried to control or regulate their emotions. Eleven of the elicited emotions fell on the anger continuum or 'cluster' (Lazarus, 1991, p. 66). For example, four teachers referred to anger, two stated 'annoyed', and one stated 'intense irritation'. Other negative emotions included 'suspicious', 'apprehensive' and disappointment. Thirteen of the 14 tertiary teachers' negative emotions related to students. The fourteenth tertiary teacher described a situation where a 'management induced thing' had resulted in the feeling of 'instant anger because of (management's) stupidity'.

Why did you try to regulate (mask or control) your emotions in that situation?

Participants gave a variety of reasons for regulating their emotions in that situation. One teacher explained that it was 'professionalism' consistent with an 'idealized emotion teacher image' (Sutton, 2004, p. 386), perhaps reflecting emotion display rules (Ekman and Friesen, 1998). Other reasons included concern about the negative effects on both students (2 participants), and teaching (2). Positively stated reasons included wanting a positive effect for the student (1), and to protect the teacher-student relationship (2). These reasons were similar to those of Sutton's (2004) middle school teachers. Classroom management reasons included the need for the teacher to have time to deal with a serious situation (1), or to actually 'control the situation' (4).

Classroom management is a significant issue for teachers in general (Sutton, 2004). Three additional reasons indicating teachers' awareness of the need for self-care were to 'protect the self', to 'not be manipulated' and to 'not become involved'. These reasons are suggestive of coping through cognitive pre-appraisal (Campos et al, 2004) preventing the emotion before it could begin. The latter two might also come under the category of behavioural through choosing to not show any emotion (Sutton et al, 2009). TT 14 explained:

I suppose going the other way, when someone's actually trying to deliberately push your buttons - you get these seventeen, eighteen year olds - they've spent those three or four years coming through high school and that's really what they've walked out the other end with, not too many qualifications, but knowing how to play the
system, how to push people's buttons and that. So they just try it on
here as well. And you sort of go, 'You're not going to get the better
of me.' And even though you can actually just feel it there, I'm not
going to show, I'm not even gonna show that you're getting to me.
You sort of try and stand, take one step back and take a deep breath.
But yeah, you are masking your emotions in some way (TT14)

**Emotion Regulation Strategies Used and Timing of Strategies**

The participants were then asked what methods or strategies they used to regulate
their emotions, before teaching, during the emotion event (at the emotion cue)
or at the end of the day.

**Emotion Regulation before Teaching**

All 14 participants reported preventative strategies at the start of the day. Their
answers tended to fall into two main categories, cognitive (12 examples) and
behavioural (5) or a combination of both. For example, TT4 explained that at the
start of the day.

I would actually remove myself from people until something
positive in the day had happened. So I think I'm hanging out for
that positive thing to happen to actually make me feel like I can
cope with the day.... I put my hat on...I am very good at acting
(TT 4).

TT 4 described behavioural removal and waiting. She has also described the way
she goes into role, which incorporates both behavioural and cognitive strategies.
TT 4 is not suppressing emotions, rather she is avoiding the risk of a negative
emotion-eliciting event, perhaps consistent with Gross's (2002) changing the
situation or diverting attention and Campos et al's (2004) 'cognitive pre-appraisal'
or 'short-circuiting of appraisals' (p. 381).

The emotion regulation strategies described by the remaining participants were
equally complex. Methods such as 'dissociate' (2) and 'let it go' (1) were also stated.
More obvious behavioural methods included having a 'cup of coffee routine'
at the beginning of the day, actually '[con]fessing up to the students about my
emotional state,' 'removing myself from people until something positive has hap-
pened,' and 'hanging out for the positive, if you wait I won't be grumpy.'
The tertiary teacher who had been angry at management described her process:

So if it comes from that source, I would never take that into the classroom, well obviously it goes with me into the classroom, but I never let the students know because as soon as you let the students know that you're in deep trouble and you actually can't show that. You have to go into the classroom, deep breath, and lock down into your lesson (TT 1).

Three participants described an almost automatic effect that happens when they arrive at work and find themselves in front of the class. Without consciously thinking about it, they said that this creates a positive emotional state for teaching - as an unconscious process. This could be an example of classically conditioned positive responding to the classroom environment and is worthy of future research. It may well reflect their years of experience and their stated passion and/or love of teaching.

**Emotion Regulation at the Time of the Emotion cue**

All 14 participants were able to describe their responsive strategies at the time of the emotion cue. Overall at least ten predominantly behavioural methods were given and seven predominantly cognitive methods, with some participants reporting both. These were mainly intended to down-regulate negative emotions. Behavioural examples included: physically distancing oneself (3), physiological methods such as 'taking a deep breath' (1) or 'go cold' (2). Other methods stated were 'ignoring it' or 'laughing it off'. Cognitive methods included: 'split second thinking about it and try to be normal'; 'quickly thinking what do I do here?'; 'in your mind you're going, I can see how you are feeling'; 'I just note this is not the time or place to let my emotions show'. One participant said 'I bite my tongue'. TT 4 explained, 'If I'm in a situation where I think I might blow my stack, I actually walk away'. She said again 'It's almost like I don't think I'm going to walk away' I literally just do it. It's like a subconscious reaction to this feeling that I have inside.'

One teacher said that 'I say to myself: 'Right you've got to be down, straight to the point' (TT 10). She also said 'It's all about acting.' TT 14 said, 'You've got to slow the situation down. You've got to give yourself time to think'. TT 3 replied that there was a need to 'try and tone it down'. TT 6 said, 'Basically, I just really got that what I was about to say was inappropriate. So, for me it's about thinking through the process.'
Two participants said that use of regulation strategies can improve with experience.

For example:

What do I do? The longer you’re in the job the more hopefully they become second nature. You know, you’ve got that experience, you’ve got the training, so it’s not a case of, right, what do I do now, as if you’ve got to go back to the guide book and look through. But it’s, right - what’s the best way to handle this? (TT 9)

I suppose the first time you do it, you’re out of your depth, and then you reflect a little bit on it, but when it comes back to a similar sort of thing comes up again, you sort of know what you reflected on and start thinking about a step or two ahead of which way you wanted to head (TT 14).

**Emotion Regulation Strategies at the End of the Day.**

The participants reported similar strategies at the end of the day to those used during the day and to those of Sutton’s (2004) middle school teachers. Behavioural strategies outnumbered cognitive by 12 to 7 (some participants reported more than one method). TT 6 explained that his cognitive methods come from specific professional development he has undertaken: ‘It doesn’t have to impact upon me .... I have done a number of courses’ At the other end of the spectrum TT 4 said, ‘I don’t have any strategies... it probably took several hours last night for me to just talk to myself ....I kept reliving what had made me feel frustrated’. Despite this participant stating she has no strategies, she does in fact use a self-talk strategy, but it takes a long time. In total three participants described the ways that they talk to themselves.

The most frequently reported behavioural strategy used related to ways of taking ‘space’ or ‘time’. Four participants used the drive home itself as a time to reflect and disengage from their emotions of the day. For example:

Sometimes I drive home and that is a thirty-minute drive. And I don’t have the radio on; I just have a white space (TT1)

I’ve got a four-wheel drive; I’ve got good vision, and I don’t care if it takes me an extra twenty-minutes to get home. And that is my de-stress station. And I think about things during the day and I just let
it go. Just let it go. Just do not stress, breathing. I normally get home and I'm so relaxed I don't even want to talk sometimes (TT 8).

My partner leaves me alone for half an hour. My partner says absolutely nothing to me, just leaves me alone for half an hour, and I guess that's my way of dealing with it (TT 12).

Three participants used self-talk, and three talked with other people, For example:

Certainly talking to my other colleagues, I'll tend not to take it home, I'd talk to other colleagues, talk to my superiors, if it warranted it. On a moral level, it would be colleagues, on a major level I'd go up the chain of command (TT 16).

I might speak to a friend but not mention any names. This is the situation and I dealt with it this way, I think I was right (TT 12).

Previous research confirms that talking with colleagues is common, and might be helpful - but is not always so (Sutton, 2004). Four participants described cognitive strategies. For example, TT 11 said, ‘Just, observing that I reacted that way, or felt that. I do a quick little think around - now is this an implication for me?’

**Comparison of Strategies Before, During and After the Emotion Event**

Viewing the responses as a whole, the emotion regulation strategies are generally similar across the three time categories. Cognitive strategies were more frequent at the beginning of the day as preparation, while behavioural methods were more frequent during and after the emotion events. It is beyond the scope of this paper to follow each participant through in detail. Briefly however, the data reveal trends for individual tertiary teachers. For example, TT 4 uses behavioural methods to remove herself in the mornings to wait for something positive to happen, although she can play the role that is required when she has to. During the day, if a negative emotion is elicited, she uses a behavioural method by walking away, often without even thinking about it. At the end of the day, TT4 says she does not have a strategy and she takes a long time reliving the event talking it over to herself. It appears that behavioural methods work well during the day by modifying the situation (Gross, 2002), but in situations where behavioural removal is not possible, TT 4's cognitive strategy takes a long time.
Brief Results on Further Questions

Regulating Positive Emotions

Twelve participants said that they did not try to regulate positive emotions. Two described the need to 'down-regulate' (Sutton et al., 2009, p. 139) positive emotions. One reason was that students should be 'not too happy, not too silly, happy, because they need to be there and learn.'

Perceptions of Success in Regulating Emotions

Ten tertiary teachers said that they thought they were successful in regulating their emotions, and two thought that were not always successful. TT4 thought she was successful when she removed herself from situations.

The Effects of Regulating Emotions

The effects of regulating were seen as either positive or negative. Positive effects of regulating negative emotions included 'space to think and remove yourself', 'improvement of teaching', 'being professional' and 'having a better experience'. An emotionally negative effect identified by two participants was that emotion regulation can be stressful, indicative of an emotional labour perspective, also suggesting that these teachers regulate through suppression rather than reappraisal (Gross, 2002). Another participant said that it 'flattens out the emotions in class'. One participant said that your personality gets numbed, but that is counterbalanced with 'you're not mired down' either.

The Effects of Not Regulating Emotions

When considering the opposite situation, that of not regulating their emotions, thirteen tertiary teachers said the consequences would be negative: on teaching (3); on learning (2); on students (2); on the tertiary teacher (5); and on 'the [attention of the] class' (2). Teachers reported that they would feel that they had 'let themselves down' or 'feel bad' if they were too emotional. Other self-perceptions would be feeling like a 'nasty person', or 'manipulated' if they lost control. Still another commented on 'self doubt as to why I am teaching'.

64
Discussion and Suggestions for Future Research

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the perceptions of a small sample of tertiary teachers about their individual emotion regulation strategies in their teaching. The interview results showed that all the tertiary teachers in this small sample used strategies to regulate their emotions, with some not even being conscious of the strategies they were using. Similar to Sutton's (2004) results, the tertiary teachers in this study linked emotions and teaching to self-regulation and professionalism before being asked specifically about these. They reported mainly cognitive and behavioural emotion regulation methods - cognitive strategies were more frequent at the beginning of the day in advance of emotion cues, in comparison to more frequent use of behavioural methods of responding to emotion cues at the time, and later at the end of the day. The analysis above reveals the underlying structure/s of the tertiary teachers' emotion regulation strategies, which appear to be consistent with relevant theory (e.g. Gross, 1998; Gross, 2002; Campos et al, 2004). The tertiary teachers also displayed similar emotion regulation goals to those of Sutton's sample of middle school teachers. For example, when describing the specific example of a time when they had regulated their emotions, the majority of reasons related to the effects of negative emotions on their teaching consistent with an emotional labour perspective (Hochschild, 1983). Bearing in mind the small size of the sample it was interesting to note that half these tertiary teachers also articulated within-teacher effects of either regulating or not regulating their emotions, most of which they perceived as negative. This might reflect the timing of their interviews. These were held subsequent to the diary study (O'Toole et al., 2010), which had included a question about the physiological effects of their emotions. This might have enhanced their awareness. Be that as it may, the tertiary teachers' perspectives were consistent with the psychophysiological effects of emotion regulation identified by Gross (2002).

It was interesting that although there was some impact from institutional management on teachers' emotions and a perceived need to regulate these, the main sources of emotions were the students. This suggests that irrespective of what is happening outside the classroom, and despite it being a time of change, when tertiary teachers step into the classroom they are fully engaged in their teaching role. Their priority focus for their teaching and emotion regulation (irrespective of how they regulated) was their students. The similarity of the findings with those of Sutton is interesting because the tertiary teachers in this present sample were also already previously qualified in their trade or domain of expertise, prior

---

Journal of Adult Learning Aotearoa New Zealand 38/2
to entering tertiary teaching. Two of the participants identified the importance of prior experience in developing emotion regulation skills. Hargreaves (1998) also noted the importance of 'growing confidence and competence [in the] early years of becoming a teacher' (p. 848) referring to the 'bank of knowledge and strategies that you have begun to accumulate over time' (p. 848). This similarity suggests that irrespective of prior career experience, and irrespective of the age of students (tertiary students are usually 18 years and beyond) the issues and emotional challenges facing teachers are common across teaching contexts, and may be generic to teaching as a profession.

The tertiary teachers expressed the high value that they placed on the student-teacher relationship, with a number of emotion regulation goals being put in place to protect this. Their reasons were similar to those of the middle-school teachers in Sutton's (2004) study, perhaps suggesting a perception that there is a relationship between teachers' regulation of negative emotions, their relationships with students, and their effectiveness overall, which Sutton has suggested needs further classroom-based research. For example, there is a growing body of research on teacher-student rapport and the role of rapport in predicting positive student outcomes (e.g., Frisby and Martin, 2010). Rapport is defined as 'an overall feeling between two people encompassing a mutual, trusting, and prosocial bond' (Frisby and Martin, 2010, p. 147). This is similar to the notion of emotional intersubjectivity (Denzin, 1984). Future research needs to explore the ways in which tertiary teachers' emotion regulation methods impact on the various components of student-teacher interactions.

Given the high frequency of anger as an emotion reported by teachers (consistent with the prevalence shown in the hitherto minimal research on emotions in tertiary teaching), the ways that tertiary teachers regulate this emotion will be important for individual wellbeing. Future research needs to focus on how teachers develop or learn to regulate their emotions. This would also include researching how some of the tertiary teachers seem able to regulate their emotions almost unconsciously as they walk into the classroom and start class. At one end of the spectrum one teacher was confidently explaining his skills based on personal development courses attended, while at the other end of the spectrum another teacher found it frustrating that she spent too long ruminating over her negative emotions at night.
Contrasting experiences of coping strategies would contribute to a possible future programme of emotion regulation training. There is empirical evidence that emotional regulation skills can be taught through Emotional Literacy programmes (Brackett et al., 2008). In conjunction with the findings of Feldman Barrett et al. (2001), this points to the potential for people to be trained to be more discriminating about their negative emotions so that they may then regulate these tendencies more effectively.

Conclusion

This study makes a contribution to the emergent literature on emotions in tertiary teaching. Whereas previous researchers (for example, Fitzpatrick & Spiller, 2010; Hastings, 2008) have revealed the significance of negative emotions in tertiary teachers' experience, the present research sheds light on the ways that a small sample of tertiary teachers manage their negative emotions with their main intentions being to preserve the teacher-student relationship and enhance the learning experience of their students. As a pilot study, with the acknowledged limitations relating to sample size and self-report methodology, this research has also indicated a number of areas for future research. While it can be seen that these tertiary teachers can and do manage their emotions in the classroom, there are indications that there is room for improvement in the regulation strategies they use for their improved health, wellbeing and career satisfaction.

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by Ako Aotearoa. Thank you to Bridget O'Regan and Pat Robertson. I thank Dr. Marion Bowl for her mentoring at the commencement of this project. Thank you also to: co-researchers Alison Ogier-Price and Andrew Hucks; transcriber Josephine Clark; Dr. Liz Tully for ongoing encouragement and Dr. Deb Hill for editing feedback. Finally I thank the participants without whom this project would not have been possible.
References


Journal of Adult Learning
Aotearoa New Zealand

Embedding Literacy, Language and Numeracy:
First Steps in a Whole of Organisation Approach

Planning and Teaching Effective Workplace Literacy, Language and Numeracy Programmes: What Does Research Tell Us?

Performance Measurement and Accountabilities:
Perspectives of English Language Partners

Tertiary Teachers' Perspectives on Emotion Regulation

Service-Learning Through Multiple Client-Sponsored Projects in an MBA Marketing Course

A History of Aotearoa in the 1970s & Early 1980s

Book Reviews
Liberating Praxis: Paulo Freire's Legacy for Radical Education and Politics
Learning and Social Difference: Challenges for Public Education and Critical Pedagogy

Bringing out the Best in Education: Enhancing Quality in Higher Education: A Tempus Survey

Volume 38, Number 2, December 2010